

Book Review: Going to War in Iraq: When Citizens and the Press Matter by Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy and George E. Marcus

In Going to War in Iraq: When Citizens and the Press Matter, Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy and George E. Marcus seek to challenge the existing rhetoric surrounding the Iraq war by examining the relationship between the US press and the public in the build-up to the invasion. Although their arguments are not necessarily ground-breaking, Laura Brechlin nonetheless welcomes the book for some of its more suggestive insights and for serving as a timely reminder of the important link between a critical and independent press and a well-informed citizenry: both crucial for the democratic process.

Going to War in Iraq: When Citizens and the Press Matter. Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy and George E. Marcus. University of Chicago Press. 2015.

In 2002, the year leading up to the invasion of Iraq, 60 per cent of Americans were reading a daily newspaper, Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy and George E. Marcus state in *Going to War in Iraq: When Citizens and the Press Matter*. This book focuses on the six-month period beginning just after Labor Day in May 2002 until October, and seeks to critically examine the effects of the political campaign that was launched to convince both the US public and Congress of the plans to invade Iraq. A plethora of literature has been produced on the Iraq war, yet the authors argue that popular rhetoric on the Iraq war got two things wrong: firstly, a number of critical newspaper articles were written; and secondly, the success of the political campaign was less than usually implied.

In fact, Republicans supported the war prior to the campaign, and Democrats and Independents increasingly opposed the plan to go to war during that period. Thus, the authors argue, three points need to be examined further: 1). Public opinion on the Iraq war, and war in general, may not necessarily be influenced by political elites; 2). Americans have the ability to form their own political judgements, alas 'under the right conditions'; and 3). These right conditions are largely dependent on the existence of an active and critical press. Not one of these three points is particularly outrageous or ground-breaking. In fact, the assertion that the US public may be able to form independent opinions on political matters is as reassuring as it is condescending.

The introduction of the aims of the book is then followed by a discussion of democracy and the conditions that promote or undermine it. Political debate and contention serve democracy best; bipartisanship can worsen the democratic condition of a country as it hides information from the public; and the press must not only be free but also critical. Finally, the public needs to be well-informed, have agency and be critical as well. Thus, the authors argue, the public must have access to information that is made available by competing political elites and is 'disseminated and critically evaluated by a free press'. Times of war, however, can curtail the 'free flow and use of information'.

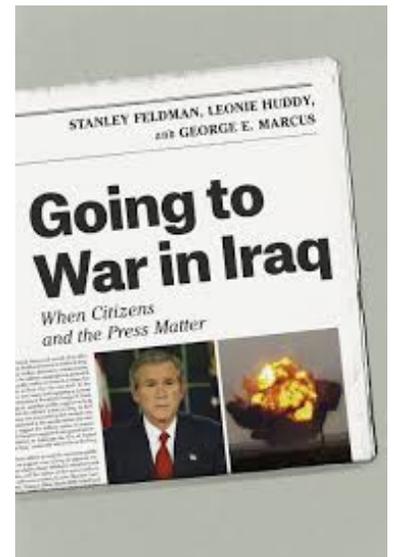




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The first chapter, much like the rest of the book, relies on a system of numbered points, which makes the book easy to read, yet repetitive. The authors repeat that only a minority of Democratic senators criticised and/or opposed the impending war, and vigorous partisan debate was therefore lacking in the period leading up to the war. Furthermore, most of the US media, and in particular the *New York Times*, were vastly uncritical of the administration, but regional newspapers fared better according to the authors' examinations and consultations of various polls.

It is then argued that the critical press is even more important during times of war, or the times leading up to war, due to 'the propensity of publics to "rally to the flag" when faced with an external threat' (11). This 'rally to the flag' attitude often leads to a lack of vigorous political debate, a lack of critical press and citizens are subsequently more likely to be manipulated by elites. One of the more interesting points that Feldman et al make in this first chapter is their reference to John Zaller's 'reception-acceptance-sampling (RAS) model of persuasion'. According to Zaller, 'the *least politically engaged* remain unexposed and thus immune to elite influence', and the *most politically engaged* have enough critical thought to form independent political opinions. It is the *moderately engaged* electorate that is most vulnerable to elite influence as they lack 'a strong partisan or ideological basis' which would counter that information flow. All this dramatically increases the importance of an investigative and critical press, and this investigative journalism, Feldman et al argue, is 'most likely to be performed by the print media'.

Considering that Feldman et al argue that surveys of the 'average American' show that voters are 'largely uninformed about public affairs, disinterested in politics, and lacking any deep principles that might organize their political views', this should leave most of the US public uninfluenced by the political elites. Indeed, the authors argue that Zaller's model does not hold up, yet their reason for this is the failure of the most engaged to be swayed by the political campaign. Instead, Feldman et al find that questions such as 'What can be gained or lost in a possible conflict? Is a military conflict worth the investment of time, money, and most importantly, lives that might be lost?' are more important than elite influence. They reference an 'event-based model', which holds that the public decides on the *necessity* of war, and argue that the effects of the pro-war campaign can be best explained somewhere between the elite-influence model and the events-based model, as the US public has 'some independent capacity for judgment'. Feldman et al argue that this independence is due to a number of 'psychological conditions', such as motivation.

The book is supported by data from the Threat and National Security Survey, the American National Election Studies and polling data from the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The authors extensively review the

media's reporting on the proposed war, giving a content analysis of newspaper and TV stories in September and October 2002. They also consider that 'anti-war proclivities' among the US public may have been caused by other factors, such as 'pre-existing liberal political ideology, pacifist leanings, or higher levels of education', yet do not find any convincing evidence that contradicts their claims about the influence of a critical, investigative press.

After covering the elite debate and the media coverage in somewhat more, but repetitive, detail in Chapters 3 and 4, Feldman et al conclude their book with more interesting arguments, such as that WikiLeaks and Edward Snowden live up to the 'meaning of a free press', and that 'in these instances, the press fulfilled its role as envisioned by the Founders, enshrined in the First Amendment, as a fiercely independent government watchdog and a cornerstone of representative democracy'. They conclude that in the 'diminished information environment' we live in today, 'democratic citizens will have a difficult time performing competently especially in times of national crisis and threat'.

While the book is well-written and at times both informative and entertaining, its repetitive nature leaves the reader with the notion that a book half the size would have sufficed. More interesting is the raw data that Feldman et al feature in their book, and some of the arguments are certainly worth pursuing. Furthermore, although the argument that a fiercely critical, independent, investigative press is the cornerstone of democracy and necessary for a well-informed citizenry is not particularly ground-breaking, it is a good reminder, especially at a time when Western countries are still militarily engaged in the Middle East.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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